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SUBJECT: FOURTH ANNUAL JAC: STRONG PROGRESS ON THE ENVIRONMENT, LESS
SUCCESS ON HEALTH

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1.(SBU) Summary. The Fourth Annual Meeting of the United States-Vietnam Joint Advisory Committee on Agent Orange/dioxin (JAC) reviewed an active year of cooperation on environmental remediation and disabilities projects. The agreed-upon JAC minutes highlighted that Agent Orange-related dioxin contamination was limited to a few former U.S. airbases, noted the effectiveness of exposure reduction measures at the Danang airport, while environmental presentations reviewed positive preliminary results from the Danang bioremediation pilot test. Several speakers noted the need for greater action to determine the scope of and respond to dioxin contamination at the Bien Hoa airbase. The JAC made less headway on health issues as the Government of Vietnam (GVN) delegation lacked participation from key health players and continued to focus on non-science based claims linking dioxin exposure to a wide variety of disabilities. Yet, we also made some progress there, winning a GVN commitment to look at public health responses to disabilities and securing a promise from the Ford Foundation to fund these efforts. The JAC received extensive, and fairly positive, coverage locally and internationally, with Vietnamese media highlighting the Ambassador's opening address detailing our fruitful engagement since the last JAC. End Summary.

Broad Participation

12. (U) The fourth annual JAC attracted nearly 30 participants from the USG and GVN, including prominent scientific experts from EPA and the CDC. While the Vietnamese delegation contained strong participation on environmental issues from the Ministry of Defense (MOD) and from Office 33, the coordinating body for GVN Agent Orange/dioxin policy, key Vietnamese players on health issues, notably, the Ministry of Health (MOH) and the Ministry of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA), failed to attend. USAID detailed its environmental response plans at the Danang airport and its implementing partners reviewed their ongoing disability support efforts. Environmental contractors to the Ford Foundation and Office 33, including Canada's Hatfield Consultants and U.S.-owned Dynamic Solutions International, detailed recent sampling and analysis at dioxin "hotspots" at former U.S. airbases. Several other donors involved directly in Agent Orange/dioxin work or on related disabilities projects, including the Ford Foundation, UNDP, Irish Aid and UNICEF, joined the JAC meeting. [Comment: This broad non-governmental participation had some downsides, however, as certain entities continued to focus on provision of services to Agent Orange "victims" and complained to the press about perceived funding delays. End Comment]

JAC Minutes Reflect Limited
Environmental Contamination

13. (SBU) The JAC minutes signed by the two countries reflect their consensus that there is no evidence of continuing dioxin contamination in areas subjected to aerial spraying during the war and that dioxin contamination appears limited to a few airports where the U.S. military stored, loaded and transferred Agent Orange and other defoliants at that time. Additionally, the minutes note that the primary source of human exposure to dioxin at Danang was through consumption of fish obtained by local residents from airport lakes. Both sides agreed that efforts to limit dioxin exposures at Da Nang airbase by preventing fishing in onsite lakes had resulted in substantially lower dioxin levels in blood in persons living around the airport.

Hatfield and MOD Sampling Provide
Further Evidence of Limited Contamination

14. (SBU) Hatfield Consultants, which has been working on Agent Orange/dioxin issues in Vietnam since 1994, provided details on recent dioxin sampling and analysis that it carried out for the GVN with Ford Foundation Funding. Hatfield's most recent studies found that dioxin contamination at the Danang airport is almost exclusively limited to the previously identified areas at the northern end of the airbase. Recent testing in areas at the southern end of the airbase, associated with the 1971 Department of Defense Pacer Ivy operation, found only one sample with elevated

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dioxin levels [Note: Pacer Ivy packaged and prepared for removal of all residual Agent Orange from Danang. End Note]. Similarly, Hatfield sampling and analysis at Phu Cat airbase indicated only a few samples at levels of dioxin contamination above internationally accepted amounts. Additionally, Hatfield reported that the majority of contamination at the Danang airbase was found at depths of less than 30 centimeters, implying that the total volume of soil to be remediated (and the related cost) may be lower than initially estimated. [Note: MOD believes that additional sampling may show contamination at deeper levels. End Note]. In other good news, preliminary testing by MOD did not find dioxin contamination at three other airbases (Tuy Hoa, Phan Rang, and Nha Trang) and limited contamination at Ton San Nhat in Ho Chi Minh City. The only news of concern came from Hatfield and MOD reports noting that dioxin contamination in and around the military airbase at Bien Hoa might be more widespread than previously detected.

Limited Exposures

15. (SBU) The Hatfield JAC presentation also highlighted limited human exposures resulting from dioxin contamination in Danang. With dioxin contamination at Danang largely limited to the northern end of the airbase and the primary human exposure pathway through consumption of contaminated fish and ducks caught by locals in the lakes on the airport grounds, Hatfield told the JAC that a total of 50 people likely were exposed to dioxin contamination [Note: the GVN has asked Hatfield to revisit this conclusion as it finalizes its report. End Note]. Successful preventive measures already had reduced those exposures and Hatfield noted that the construction of a fence to prevent locals from fishing and harvesting aquatic plants already had dramatically lowered dioxin levels in blood samples near the airport.

Preliminary Success for Bioremediation Pilot Test

16. (SBU) Scientists from EPA and the Vietnam Academy of Science and Technology (VAST) presented preliminary results from the ongoing bioremediation pilot test at Danang, which seemed to show that microorganisms have been degrading dioxin [Note: MOD, which has permitted the test at the military controlled airport, remains more skeptical about bioremediation's potential. End Note]. If later results are consistent with this finding, bioremediation may form a cost-efficient remediation solution that can be modified in the future to address Vietnam's growing level of contamination from

industrial pollutants.

Vietnam National Action Plan

17. (SBU) Office 33 Director General Dr. Lai Minh Hien presented a summary of the draft National Action Plan for Overcoming the Consequences of Agent Orange/dioxin in Vietnam (NAP) and asked that JAC participants provide input. Per Dr. Hien, the NAP has developed a schedule through 2020 to reach three primary goals: completing an assessment of environmental and health consequences of Agent Orange/dioxin; developing a system to remediate contaminated areas, recover ecosystems subject to spraying during the war and provide medical care to "victims" of Agent Orange; and raising awareness and mobilizing resources. UNDP, which supported the GVN drafting efforts, noted that the NAP contained many principles (particularly in the environmental area) already agreed to by parties focusing on the issue. UNICEF praised the effort but suggested that efforts should focus on boosting support for all the disabled instead of looking first at identifying "victims" based on a self-assessment of exposure.

U.S. Details Concrete Projects

18. (U) As highlighted by Ambassador Michalak during his opening remarks, the USG briefed JAC participants on the initiation of several U.S.-funded activities over the past year. USAID and its implementing partners detailed disabilities support programs in the Danang area. Using money from the FY07 USD 3 million appropriation, USAID has already provided USD 1 million for these projects, obligated an additional USD 1 million from recent FY 09 funding, and committed another USD 1 million during FY 10, subject

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to the availability of funds. USAID also advised that it will soon announce the results of the procurement process for services to conduct a joint environmental impact assessment with the GVN for dioxin containment at Danang Airport and for developing engineering designs, specifications and plans for construction of a secure landfill and associated dioxin removal containment activities. This contract will utilize the balance of FY 07 funding and will provide the basis for expending FY 09 funding for environmental remediation.

Lagging Health Progress

19. (SBU) The JAC health discussions reflected the continuing divide in approaches between the two governments. Despite repeated reminders to our GVN interlocutors before the JAC, neither MOH (an official member of the 6 person GVN delegation) nor MOLISA sent representatives to the meeting. Vietnamese presenters continued to focus on the sufferings of Agent Orange "victims" without providing any support linking those sufferings to dioxin exposure. Vietnamese participants in the JAC Health Task Force, held concurrently with the overall JAC session, took a softer stance, but asked the USG to focus USAID projects only on assistance to Agent Orange "victims." Failure by the GVN to move off of its "victims"-first agenda makes it unlikely that we will be able to agree to a long-term strategy for dioxin responses, as proposed by Vice-Minister of Natural Resources and Environment Nguyen Xuan Cuong in his opening remarks, in the near future. Yet, at the same time, we did make some inroads. The Health Task Force established that while humanitarian-based medical and clinical services form a necessary foundation to cooperative work in health, long-term solutions must focus on building Vietnamese institutional capacity to address all disabilities and birth defects regardless of cause, using a modern, public health framework. The agreed upon minutes reflect the need for effective surveillance, prevention and exposure reduction programs to reduce the overall disabilities burden in Vietnam, while the Ford Foundation subsequently agreed to help fund work by the Health Task Force to put those programs into practice near the hotspots.

Positive Media Reports

¶10. (SBU) This year's JAC received wide coverage locally and in the international media. Press reports on the JAC, which focused on cooperation and U.S. engagement, contrasted with the earlier reporting surrounding Vietnam's first "Agent Orange Day," held on August 10. While Vice Minister Cuong's opening speech criticized the perceived slow pace of disbursing U.S. assistance and the need to focus on "victims," most Vietnamese newspaper coverage devoted more space to Ambassador Michalak's recitation of concrete U.S. actions. The final joint press conference also led to positive reporting in 50 news articles, on line reports, blogs, and TV broadcasts, including several constructive comments from the Vietnamese JAC co-chair, Dr. Le Ke Son. We expect to continue the run of good press when USAID announces the remediation preparation contractor later this month. Over the past few months, several international journalists have contacted the Embassy seeking information for more in-depth and, we hope, objective pieces on Agent Orange/dioxin, and we will provide the good environmental news from the JAC to these reporters.

Comment

¶11. (SBU) JAC presentations indicated that dioxin contamination may be limited to a few locations at a few airbases, that exposures to such contamination may be fairly limited and that reasonably affordable prevention and remediation activities may remove ongoing contamination risks. Taken together, this information will allow us to start to calculate the universe of all potential dioxin-related remediation in Vietnam and, eventually, the total financial resources necessary (and what proportion of that the United States may cover) to address the environmental impacts of war-related dioxin contamination. Vietnamese lack of substantive engagement on health issues is discouraging and a reminder that the GVN is unlikely to wind down its 40 year Agent Orange propaganda campaign.
Michalak